If You Build It, They Will Come: Educational Partnerships for Special Collections

Sarah Joyce Andrus
The Henry Ford, Benson Ford Research Center

What is the Benson Ford Research Center

The Benson Ford Research Center (BFRC) is the archive and research library of the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation. Our collection spans centuries of American Innovation in a variety of subjects. The BFRC collection contains nearly 50,000 books, 45,000 trade catalogs, countless periodicals, and an extensive collection of archival material. The collections are key to our ability to assist with research both on site and remotely to researchers and staff of skill levels.

Instructing at a New Level

Staff at the BFRC consist of Librarians and Archivists who are experienced with assisting researchers regardless of research background. However, our collections are popular among older populations, vehicle enthusiasts, historians, and graduate students. Because of this, we needed to adjust the skill level of our assistants to meet the needs of a high school.

Programming

The Henry Ford has a well-established special access program that includes Storage Tours, mainly of our archival and library stacks. To aid with our instruction of 9th through 12th graders, we modified this program with the help of lesson plans and course objectives. This has allowed us to showcase age and topic appropriate items from the collection of the BFRC.

These tours, paired with information sessions in our public Reading Room allow the BFRC to split classes in half to give more individualized attention to students.

Our Relationship

The BFRC and HFA have had a relationship of peaks and valleys over their 20+ year history. Students have unique circulation privileges, access to the Reading Room for studying, and hands on class activities to learn about primary sources. However BFRC and HFA are still different institutions. We operate on different schedules, with different administrations and different, albeit compatible, missions. At times, these differences create communication issues and a lack of interest from both parties to go the extra mile to provide unique learning experiences for students. Over the last 4 years BFRC staff have adjusted their goals to ensure this relationship thrives.

Growing Pains and Pain Points

On the surface both BFRC and HFA seem to exist in harmony. However our differing work environments and levels of institutional support effect how well we can work together. Some major issues that we are currently working through include:

- HFA Staff expectations
- BFRC Staff learning new instruction level to accommodate a new skill level of researcher
- Red Tape surrounding access to collection items
- Scheduling expectations
- Reading Room availability and policies
- Lack of transparency about lesson plans and learning expectations

Each year of engagement crosses items off this list. As we continue to develop strategies and relationships with HFA the BFRC is confident we will move past these issues.

Subject Strengths

The BFRC collects items that meet the mission and curatorial guidelines of The Henry Ford. This eye to collecting means our stacks look eclectic at the best of times. Because of diverse collecting and our wide interpretation of innovation our collections do not always line up with standard K-12 school subjects. To the best of our abilities here is how we pair up our collecting with the types of classes that show interest in visiting the BFRC.

Technology and Communication
- Agriculture and the Environment
- Power and Energy
- Transportation
- Design and Making
- Domestic Life
- Public Life

Engineering, English, Graphic Design and Math
- Science and History
- Science, STEM, History and Math
- Art and Design
- History, Life Skills, Art and Music
- History and Government

The Trends Keep Changing

The nature of the BFRC collection is not inherently teen friendly. Artifacts that excite our usual researchers don't raise an eyebrow with HFA students. Over the last 3 years the BFRC team has tried to connect to these students through history and pop culture.

This includes pulling out issues of Rolling Stone and Seventeen magazine, candlesticks and letters by Alexander Hamilton, and anything related to our technology collection. Sears catalogs from the 1920's and 1930's have also been popular to showcase inflation, change in lifestyle and fashion evolution.

By trying to relate history through topics and individuals the students are already familiar with, we are able to get more engagement out of each visit. As a bonus, each term leaves us with a few new history buffs ready to use our collection for their own research.

Contact

SarahA@TheHenryFord.org
Research.Center@TheHenryFord.org